Move over Atheism, Buddhism has you beat. What angers most Christians about Atheism is that it denies the existence of their unseen heavenly God. That’s nothing. Buddhism denies not only the unseen heavens and their godly residents, but also the visible earth and all its inhabitants. And just to be fair, a good Buddhist denies his/her own existence as well. This strikes Westerners and monotheists as contradictory from a rational perspective, which it is, But Buddhism believes that Ultimate Reality lies beyond rational human thought’s ability to comprehend.

Let me explain Buddhism in two steps. In the first, Buddhism developed from Hinduism took many beliefs from it. One of these was that the natural and supernatural realms, as Western religions would term them, belong to a single structure called Samsara. Everyone and everything living in Samsara is subject to reincarnation, upon death they are reborn into Samsara. Again and again and again. This applies to the gods and the world, the heavens, and their human and divine inhabitants are real falls away. One knows Ultimate Reality as the appearance of reality.

The most powerful beings are humans who have achieved enlightenment. In the Sanskrit language, enlightenment is called bodhi, and one who achieves it is a Buddha. In Mahayana Buddhism, such enlightened beings have two possibilities, they can either pass on into Ultimate Reality and end their ever-repeating existence in Samsara, or they can use the power they gain through enlightenment to help others. These are known as bodhisattvas, “enlightened saviors.” Bodhisattvas wield their vast power to assist others, usually relieving their suffering or helping them to achieve enlightenment.

What is enlightenment?

The answer brings us to the second step of the explanation. According to Buddhist belief, humans live lives of suffering and loss; pleasure and enjoyment occurs rarely and fleetingly. Reincarnation brings nothing therefore but repeated and continuing suffering. Most Buddhists live such difficult lives providing for themselves and their loved ones, it is believed, that they have little choice but to request help from gods and the more powerful bodhisattvas and buddhas for help.

But a few Buddhists eschew ties to family and others to enter a monastery and seek enlightenment. Enlightenment enables one to escape the recurring suffering of life in Samsara by realizing that all Samsara is an illusion. Ultimate Reality lies beyond it.

Humans are deceived by the apparent reality of the world and universe in which they live. They become attached to it and to the people that inhabit it, and to themselves. They love their parents, spouses, and children. They hate their enemies. They become proud of their talents and skills. They become vain about their looks and their social status. They desire comfort, sufficient food, and possessions. These emotions attach them firmly to this world and its reality.

This is all an illusion; it is not real, despite what it seems. When a monk enters a monastery, the first thing they begin to learn is that one’s attachment to people and things gives (seeming) permanence and solidity to the illusion of life. They learn detachment, to remove the links that tie them to people and objects in Samsara, the links that give Samsara the appearance of reality.

Once this is mastered, monks must learn that they themselves are not real; they are part of the illusion as well. This realization is extremely difficult, given the persistence of each person’s ego, and may take two or three reincarnations to achieve. But once enlightenment is found, then the illusion that the world, the heavens, and their human and divine inhabitants are real falls away. One knows Ultimate Reality as it truly is. Is this difficult? You bet. Do many Buddhists achieve enlightenment? Only a few. But in Buddhist belief, that does not make it any less certain.

If Buddhism, with its denial of what Douglas Adams calls “life, the universe, and everything,” still qualifies as a religion, then Atheism’s denial of god(s) poses no obstacle to its classification as a religion.
Commentary on What Buddhists Believe


Dear Ms. O’Brien,

I address this reply to you, since you were kind enough to give a thoughtful response to my column.

To begin, let me explain my column, Religion Today. I write this column twice a month to be published in a few newspapers around my state. The column began ten years ago and has been written regularly since then. Newspapers restrict space and so the column is limited to about 600 words.

The column has a purpose. Each one begins with the following comment: “Religion Today is contributed by the University of Wyoming’s Religious Studies Program to examine and to promote discussion of religious issues.” The column does not claim to have the last word, but aims to encourage readers to think about the questions raised and to see them in a new light. Too often, people simply assume religions are old fashioned and irrelevant to our world today and so my intention is to illustrate how religions and religious questions still impact us and shape how humanity lives in the modern world. Many of my readers find their interest engaged by the topics I raise and go elsewhere to learn more. Often they go to articles and blogs such as the ones you write about Buddhism at About.com.

My blog, the one you read, was created as an online resource for those newspaper readers. (Due to search engines, it now reaches a wider audience.)

I write about a variety of religions, topics, and issues; sometimes the columns address current topics, other times I address issues that have not been relevant for millennia. I do not limit myself to a single religion, time period, or geographical location. In other words, I write about questions that I think my audience would find interesting and thought provoking. If you read the titles on the blog, you will see the range of topics I cover.

Who are the column’s readers? Many have a college degree, others do not. Some come from a religious background, most often a form of Christianity, but many do not. While they may have a general interest in knowing more about religions, only a few know a significant amount about any religion other than their own.

Every time I write a column, then, I must choose a topic that I can discuss in 600 words with an audience who is intelligent and thoughtful, but not necessarily knowledgeable about the specific religion or issue at hand. They do not know its terminology or jargon, and any explanations given must fit into the allotted 600 words. In a column on Buddhism, for example, I cannot refer to Nagarjuna or Sunyata as if that will mean anything to my readers. I cannot even assume they recognize elementary Buddhist ideas such as enlightenment, suffering, or meditation. One of the practical results of these considerations is that I must limit the complexity of any topic. In the end, since it is a newspaper column, it must also be engaging and interesting.

What follows is a response to the points you and others raise, written in a form of a commentary on the original column. The column is given in italics while the commentary is in roman characters.

What Buddhism does and does not believe in Paul V.M. Flesher

Move over Atheism, Buddhism has you beat. What angers most Christians about Atheism is that it denies the existence of their unseen heavenly God. That’s nothing. Buddhism denies not only the unseen heavens and their godly residents, but also the visible earth and all its inhabitants. And just to be fair, a good Buddhist denies his/her own existence as well. This strikes Westerners and monotheists as contradictory from a rational perspective, which it is. But Buddhism believes that Ultimate Reality lies beyond rational human thought’s ability to comprehend.

Like any good writing assignment, the opening paragraph state the essay’s point, providing a thesis statement in a manner aimed to attract the attention of readers and entice them to read further. The points are argued and explained in the essay’s body.

Let me explain Buddhism in two steps. In the first, Buddhism developed from Hinduism and took many beliefs from it. One of these was that the natural and supernatural realms, as Western religions would term them, belong to a single structure called Samsara. Everyone and everything living in Samsara is subject to reincarnation, upon death they are reborn into Samsara. Again and again and again. This applies to the gods in the heavens as well as the humans and animals on earth. The gods may be strong, spiritual beings who live long lives, but they do not live forever and they are not all powerful.

This paragraph gives a brief explanation of Samsara in terms of both cosmic geography and the cycle of rebirth and redeath. It’s fairly traditional and provides the common ground from which most forms of Buddhism take their notions of spatial organization and the place of humanity in it. Most Buddhist sects and thinkers tweak the description a bit to put their own stamp on it, but few stray very far from the traditional picture. As you observed, some see it as a metaphor or “spiritualize” it, but that is not a relevant point to my argument: I was not going to take an easy way to argue nonexistence by claiming that Buddhists thought it was all metaphorical.

Nagarjuna made the observation, “The doctrine of the Buddhas is taught with reference to two truths—conventional truth and ultimate truth….Without dependence on everyday practice the ultimate is not taught. Without resorting to the ultimate, nirvana is not attained.” The meaning I used for the English word “reincarnation” can be illuminated by this observation. At the popular level of everyday practice, “reincarnation” can be used to designate rebirth as well as the ongoing cycle of rebirth and redeath. That is why I used the term here; it was the one word which conveyed my needed meaning clearly. “Rebirth” alone would not have been a good choice because it is too close to the Christian notion of being “born again,” an idea with which most of my readers are familiar, since most come from a Christian background. Being born again is a spiritual rebirth that happens in this world, in the one life that Christianity believes humans pass through. I should also note that many academic scholars use...
the term reincarnation in this manner with regard to Buddhism; so my usage is not unusual.

From another perspective, “reincarnation” is the wrong word for this process in Buddhism. The religion’s concept of “no-self” means that nothing (no-thing) comes back into being (to use the literal meaning of reincarnation as “incarnated again”) because no element of a first individual is reborn into or as part of a second, reborn individual.

It is conceivable that I could have used the idea of no-self to demonstrate my point that “a good Buddhist denies his/her own existence,” because there is no self. The self is not an impermanent “object,” but is instead a temporary fiction which a person creates from the composite of skandhas and dharmas that went into their construction. But if you have ever taught this idea and its accompanying notion of Dependent Origination, you will know that there is nothing that can be said in 600 words or less that could convey this complex of ideas to a readership completely unfamiliar with it. A reference in a sentence or two would only have confused, and conveyed no meaning. I often teach a course that introduces students to six world religions. In the Buddhism unit, I introduce the ideas of no-self and dependent origin in a 20-30 portion of my lecture. Most students leave scratching their head, grasping only a glimmer of the concepts’ meaning, even though they have already studied Hinduism and its notion of samsara. (We return to it in the next lecture and in the review session.)

Note that I left out of the column any discussion of karma, merit and levels of rebirth as well. It was not needed for the argument.

In the context of my previous two columns on Atheism, the important point of this paragraph was the idea that the gods are not the ultimate beings in this cosmic organization. Not only do Buddhists and bodhisattvas stand above and beyond them, gods are also caught in the web of samsara. This is quite different from the way Western Religions conceive divine beings and therefore different from the way atheists in the West conceive the divine beings they reject.

The most powerful beings are humans who have achieved enlightenment. In the Sanskrit language, enlightenment is called bodhi, and one who achieves it is a Buddha. In Mahayana Buddhism, such enlightened beings have two possibilities, they can either pass on into Ultimate Reality and end their ever-repeating existence in Samsara, or they can use the power they gain through enlightenment to help others. These are known as bodhisattvas, “enlightened saviors.” Bodhisattvas wield their vast power to assist others, usually relieving their suffering or helping them to achieve enlightenment.

This is a fairly standard description of nirvana and parinirvana. It introduces the distinction between Theravada’s concept of enlightenment that emphasizes the arhat’s achievement of parinirvana and Mahayana’s reformulation that focuses on the importance of compassion and elevates the model of the Buddha as a bodhisattva who uses his enlightenment-gained powers to help stem the suffering of others. Calling nirvana “Ultimate Reality” is not original to me, but is used in many publications as a way of referring to the importance yet indescribability of nirvana.

Do bodhisattvas remain in samsara? Sure they do; that’s the whole point. Look at Avalokiteshvara. He is reborn again and again, in recent centuries as the Dalai Lama. He remains in samsara, living among dukkha, although his enlightenment has detached him from the bounds with which samsara traps and snare ordinary humans.

What is enlightenment?

The answer brings us to the second step of the explanation. According to Buddhist belief, humans live lives of suffering and loss; pleasure and enjoyment occurs rarely and fleetingly. Reincarnation brings nothing therefore but repeated and continuing suffering. Most Buddhists live such difficult lives providing for themselves and their loved ones, it is believed, that they have little choice but to request help from gods and the more powerful bodhisattvas and buddhas for help.

This paragraph aims to describe dukkha, which is commonly translated as “suffering” in English. This is of course the first of the Four Noble Truths which set out the human problem as defined in Buddhism and point to the solution (the Eight-Fold Path). The paragraph’s last sentence gives the description a bit of a twist not found in most elementary descriptions of dukkha, but it is not inaccurate and connects well with an American readership. Life as dukkha is not unmitigated suffering, there is some pleasure and enjoyment.

Note the reference to impermanence as a characteristic of dukkha in the use of “loss” and “fleeting.” It is not a complete discussion of this notion, but it is present despite the column’s word limit.

But a few Buddhists eschew ties to family and others to enter a monastery and seek enlightenment. Enlightenment enables one to escape the recurring suffering of life in Samsara by realizing that all Samsara is an illusion. Ultimate Reality lies beyond it.

I have early Buddhist practice in mind when I talk about eschewing family ties. Many later forms of Buddhism, even in Theravada, do not do this. But it describes the classical forms of Chan and Zen.

Illusion (maya) is what prevents insight and enlightenment. It takes a variety of meanings in different types of Buddhism. The reference to Ultimate Reality as “beyond” is a reference to its location in terms of the Eight-Fold Path, and should not be seen as a geographical observation. There are some forms of Theravada which see nirvana as another “place,” however, as something different from samsara.

Humans are deceived by the apparent reality of the world and universe in which they live. They become attached to it and to the people that inhabit it, and to themselves. They love their parents, spouses, and children. They hate their enemies. They become proud of their talents and skills. They become vain about their looks and their social status. They desire comfort, sufficient food, and possessions. These emotions attach them firmly to this world and prevent them from realizing the deeper realities of life.

This paragraph obviously consists of examples of desire (desire of course being the second of the Noble Truths), in particular examples indicating how desire and its associated emotions strengthen the false perception that samsara is real by creating bonds between an individual and “things” (including people) in
samsara. Those emotions include love and hate, pride and vanity, desire for and possessiveness over the needs and wants of human life.

This is all an illusion; it is not real, despite what it seems. When a monk enters a monastery, the first thing they begin to learn is that one’s attachment to people and things gives (seeming) permanence and solidity to the illusion of life. They learn detachment, to remove the links that tie them to people and objects in Samsara, the links that give Samsara the appearance of reality.

The essay here shifts to a brief discussion of a monk’s training to see through the maya of samsara to what is actually present, or more accurately stated in Buddhist terminology, what is actual. The paragraph does not yet engage the questions of the false, seeming multiplicity of samsara or the underlying true character of the unity of all things as sunyata, emptiness. Instead it focuses on the way in which people’s desire imbues samsara with apparent reality and thus ties them to dukkha.

In English, Buddhism typically uses the term “attachment” to refer to an individual being concerned with outcomes and caused results. It suggests that a person cares about people, success, and so on. This is not compassion, but desire. In the column, I used the term with a slight twist that takes advantage of its common meaning to create an image that captures part of the Buddhist notion but does not require a full explanation of the Buddhist concept. The same interpretive move applies to my use of the English word detachment. I do not give the entire Buddhist meaning of the two terms (as if one could in 600 words), but I give enough so that the readers gain an appreciation of the importance of the terms in Buddhism and some inkling of the concepts they designate.

Once this is mastered, monks must learn that they themselves are not real; they are part of the illusion as well. This realization is extremely difficult, given the persistence of each person’s ego, and may take two or three reincarnations to achieve. But once enlightenment is found, then the illusion that the world, the heavens, and their human and divine inhabitants are real falls away. One knows Ultimate Reality as it truly is. Is this difficult? You bet. Do many Buddhists achieve enlightenment? Only a few. But in Buddhist belief, that does not make it any less certain.

The first sentence implies there was an order to a monk’s learning, but this is probably not the case. Monks learn about oneself as part of their earliest lessons. Its full meaning is usually not immediately realized but instead becomes a focus of meditation, perhaps for a lifetime or more. This focus on/search for/striving towards (none of these accurately captures the attitude or actions) enlightenment is accompanied by explorations in the meaning of dependent origination, the character of samsara, elements of the eight-fold path, emptiness, etc.

To say that “the illusion that the world...is real falls away” is not to say that maya/samsara does not exist. It is a claim of the nonexistence of its reality, a perfectly ordinary Madhyamika position. It certainly is not a claim of nihilism, which the Buddha himself denied was the case. This paragraph cannot tell the entire story, but it is correct as far as it goes and does not misrepresent the Buddhist view. If one was teaching a series of classes on this concept, it would be fine to stop here and pick up the next stage of the concept at the next meeting.

When I was writing the column, I had in mind the Yogacara School of Buddhism, known more accurately as the Cittamatra or Mind Only School. This post-Madhyamika school holds that the only thing that has inherent existence is the flow of perceptions registered in the mind. The concepts or images which the mind builds from those perceptions are not real. Furthermore, it is impossible to go beyond the perceptions to determine whether or not they are perceptions of actual objects. So in the end, samsara and all it contains is an illusion because, as far as can be determined, it is a construct of the mind from untestable perceptions. Samsara, the self, gods, dharmas and even bodhisattvas and buddhas do not exist outside one’s mind.

Zen’s notion of samsara differs from that of Yogacara; it takes the route of non-dualism. But even though my explanation in the column was formulated in terms of Yogacara, it can also be understood as fitting with Zen’s conception of existence/nonexistence.

What is non-dualism? It is the opposite of dualism. Western philosophy is dualist, there are two ontological positions. Something either “is” or it “is not.” These match the physical or material character of the natural world and hence are seen as the only two possible positions.

Buddhist thought has these two ontological categories and posits two more: something “neither is nor is not,” and something “both is and is not.” These go beyond the character of the natural world. This is non-dualist. The basic effect of non-dualist thought is to see the unity of all things. In other words, the cosmos does not consist of a multiplicity of different things, but that those seemingly many things are only one thing.

These are difficult ontological concepts to learn and use, and novice Buddhists (and even some more senior Buddhists) take many years to master them. They then seem to forget that struggle. Let me give an example of how “unnatural” these two additional ontological categories are. When I was studying at Oxford many years ago, I took a bus trip with a group of fellow graduate students. On the way home, I sat next to a doctoral student in philosophy. He started talking about philosophy, about which I knew little at the time. So to participate in the conversation, I dredged up the only thing I knew about ontology, these four Buddhist concepts. He was outraged! For the next hour we had an intellectual jousting match, with his voice getting louder and louder as he insisted that such categories could not be “.:”) and getting angrier and angrier since he assumed I was making fun of him. He persisted even as I tried to calm things down. By the end of the trip, everyone on the bus was glad to escape.

OK, so how is the statement “once enlightenment is found, then the illusion that the world, the heavens, and their human and divine inhabitants are real falls away,” compatible with Zen? Zen believes in the unity of all multiplicity, and hence that samsara and nirvana are the same. But they are also not the same. That is the same as saying that samsara and emptiness are the same, but are also not the same. What does this mean?

To humans living in samsara, multiplicity is apparent and apparently real. They can envision nothing else. They see life, the universe and everything as a mass of multiple forms. This is maya, illusion. The goal of Buddhism in general and Zen in particular is to teach people to understand the illusion of
multiplicity, to put it negatively, and to see the unity of which everything is a part, to put it positively.

What unites these many forms? Emptiness. These forms—from trees and animals to cars and rocks—can be understood simply as ephemeral, impermanent containers for Emptiness. Emptiness is not nothing (no-thing), but is instead the non-descriptive name of that which is the only inherently real. Like nirvana, it is inherently indescribable.

Here is where Zen usually shifts to metaphors for explanation. My favorite is that of waves on the ocean. The waves are the multiplicity of forms in samsara, they rise and fall quickly, without apparent rhyme or reason. The ocean symbolizes Emptiness; it remains full and complete and largely unmoved even as waves briefly ripple across its surface. The ocean has a reality and a permanence the waves lack. This is the difference between the inherently real and the illusion of samsara which only seems real.

Back to Nagarjuna’s two truths. The maya of samsara is real because it is “conventionally” true. Humans must work within its reality to attain enlightenment. The enlightened one knows the ultimate truth, which is that conventional truth is untrue. Yet ironically (or should I say “both…and…”?), if a bodhisattva does not accept (that is, hold as true) the conventional truths of samsara, then he/she can not follow their compassion to assist those still within samsara. Thus there is both existence and nonexistence of samsara, emptiness, and nirvana. Yet in terms of the Ultimate Truth of nirvana (rather than the conventional truth of samsara), samsara with its people, gods, nature, and self do not exist.

Yes, we can qualify existence as “inherent existence” or go more deeply into the theories and details of dependent origination, but that is not necessary. “Inherent existence” is a “conventional” term for use by those of us bound to samsara. The column’s point is that from the perspective of enlightenment, nothing in samsara exists, nor does samsara itself. That is the point of enlightenment. It is to see samsara from the ultimate view, not the conventional view. Can a bodhisattva see something that does not exist? See what the unenlightened see? Yes, but that does not make it any more real.

There is also a way to explain this with the doctrines of Hua-Yen Buddhism, but I’ll spare you.

If Buddhism, with its denial of what Douglas Adams calls “life, the universe, and everything,” still qualifies as a religion, then Atheism’s denial of god(s) poses no obstacle to its classification as a religion.

In the end, I suspect it was the paralleling of Buddhism and Atheism that got many upset. Buddhists and members of other religions do not like being compared to Atheists, and as I learned from responses to the previous two columns, Atheists certainly do not like to be likened to members of religions.

The claim on which the column ends does not liken Buddhism to Atheism, or vice versa. Instead, it is a way of countering Atheism’s claim that because they do not believe in a god they are not religious. In my previous two columns, I had argued that belief in a god, especially in a god as the ultimate being, was not necessary for classification as a religion. The discussion of Buddhism and its beliefs about gods, self and reality was brought to illustrate the variety of religious belief in such things, a comparison that makes Atheism’s claims look fairly shallow.

To be clear, Atheists are nihilists in the sense that they believe that no gods exist. At all. Full stop. That is not the position of Buddhism, and I did not say that. I neither said nor implied that Buddhism was an atheistic religion. Nor would I agree with anyone who did. Instead, I tried to illustrate to a largely non-Buddhist readership, in about 600 words, how Buddhism could be considered a religion that saw gods as both existent and as non-existent, but more importantly, as secondary to bodhi, enlightenment.

So, Ms. O’Brien, I wanted to show you that the column was written out of a deep understanding and appreciation of Buddhism. I know we will differ on how I worded some ideas, and the conceptual implications of those choices. Such disagreements are common in Mahayana Buddhism. The Buddha tried to direct his disciples away from such “speculation” as this, but it seems not to have worked in the end. Oh well.